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SKI LESSONS

Sometimes no matter how hard you try to love them, snow sports aren't all they're cracked up to be.

By Debbie Leaman

I should be a fearless skier. After all, I've skied for 40 years. Since the age of seven, it's been a part of my life. I've hiked up cornices and skied down narrow chutes, across exposed bowls, and through thickets of trees. I even did a brief stint at racing. With all of this experience, anyone might conclude that I am a competent and intrepid skier. But I'm not.

Over the years I have broken my arm, torn my calf muscle, and chipped some teeth. I have been walloped by chairlifts, run over by skiers, and whacked on the head in the Alta parking lot as my husband, Howard, closed the hatch of our 4Runner. Thank God I was wearing a helmet. Now I ski with both my health insurance card and glasses to read medical disclaimers. Neatly tucked away in my pocket, next to my tube of Blistex, these are my good-luck charms, providing protection from danger.

Why do I subject myself to this? Trading New York traffic for lift lines, Howard and I moved to Salt Lake City years ago; we wanted to live the ski life. This unspoken pact, however, became a test for me far beyond what I imagined. This is ski country. Even the mountains are extreme. Snowcapped and barren, these immense masses are dotted with a smattering of pine trees and aspen groves, making the mountains I grew up with look like lush speed bumps. But since moving to ski paradise, I've been determined to be as competent as any local on the slopes. I just didn't realize what that would take.

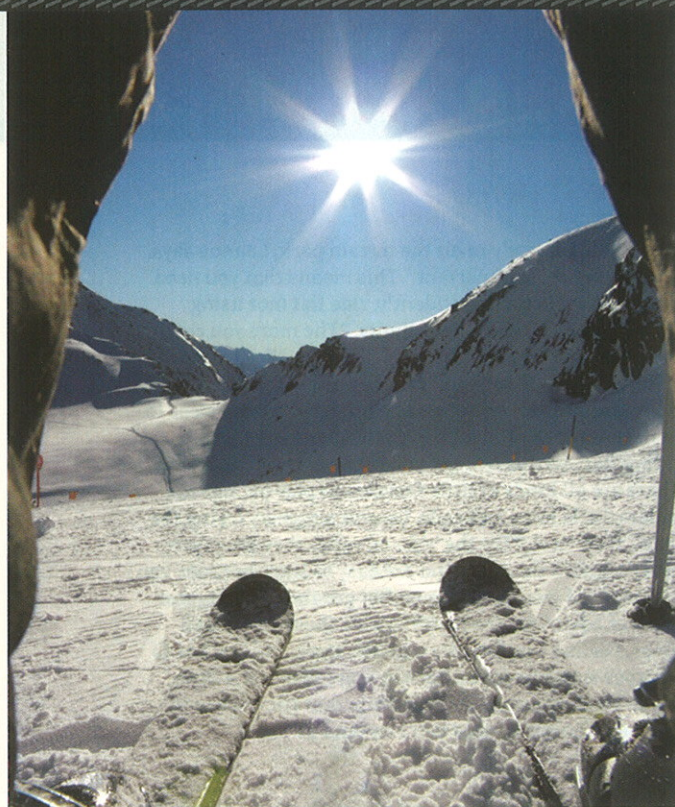
I didn't want to be one of those wives whose husband always has something to say about what can be improved. So, to advance, and to shut Howard up, I enrolled in lessons—lots of them. There were women's ski clinics, private lessons, "adult breakthrough" classes, and group sessions. I even contemplated a yoga/ski retreat. And through these experiences I have met many instructors, from compassionate to abusive.

A few years ago at a local resort, I had an instructor named Rick. Ah, Rick, a forty-something former high-school ski racer who, with aging knees, tried to coach us middle-aged adults as if we cared about racing ourselves. Rick epitomized the western macho ski culture. Nothing was too challenging to conquer for there was no place for fear on the mountain. Unfortunately, I had to tolerate a full day with him.

The lesson with Rick started off badly. A gray, windy day with flat light made seeing a challenge. At the top of a steep bowl, the class huddled together, skis dangling precariously over the edge. I had to remind myself that I was enduring this to become a better skier. Sensing my concern, Rick imparted these caring words of advice: "Just eat nails and do it!" He instructed us to watch him to see how it's done. Positioning himself like the has-been racer he was, he sped straight down, hit a mogul, went flying, and had his own personal yard sale. He was pissed. I was thrilled. Justice.

After Rick there were others. Many others. Nicola instructed me to hop and push off from my poles at each turn. Tuffy suggested that I use my knees like headlights. Frank tapped his poles behind him so I'd focus ahead, and Bob told us to pretend we were children playing cops and robbers and to hold our hands like "shooters" as we planted our poles.

Was this collection of jumbled advice confusing me? I just wanted some inspiration—a way to unlock my inner skier.



Still seeking, I agreed to enroll in a six-week expert session with my husband. Who would have known that Ron—macho Rick's identical twin—would be our teacher? I had a feeling that this was not going to go well. Before the start of class, I mentioned to him that I am a decent skier, just cautious.

"We'll just have to blow some sunshine up your ass" he replied, promptly leading us through a glade of pine trees. Where do they get these guys?

Ron's technique was eating raw fear. He took us to the top of an 11,000-foot cornice, where I stared into the abyss. One misstep and I could tumble for miles, maimed instantly. As if he were a Zen master imparting words of wisdom, he calmly said, "Quiet your mind." Quiet my mind?! A few helpful hints might have come in handy. I realized that I was driven to succeed to the point of madness.

The next week Ron took us to a narrow chute laden chock-full of moguls the size of baby elephants. Peering down, palms sweaty, I snapped. That was it—I'd reached my limit. Sidestepping back up, I hollered to the group, "I'm out of here!"

That was the last class I attended. Afterward, Ron bluntly told my husband, "Your wife is a level 9 [expert] skier with a level 5 [intermediate] attitude." Meaning: she is a technically good skier with a bad attitude. Was that a backhanded compliment or a direct insult?

Quitting lessons has been liberating. I've had it. Instead I've decided to try my own technique. It's very simple: As I thrust my body down the hill, I plant my pole and say, "Screw it." For each turn it's the same mantra. After all these years of trying to conquer my fear and tap into my inner skier, I understand now that skiing is counterintuitive. To ski well you have to throw yourself down the mountain, feeling completely out of control. For me that has always been the inherent conflict.

This past ski season has undoubtedly been the most enjoyable. If I felt like a challenge, I'd go for it. Apprehensive or tired? I'd honor that. I have even told my husband in no uncertain terms: no more lessons. The fact is I am not a fearless skier. But if I'm staring down a narrow chute on a cold and windy day, I may just have to gently remind myself to "Eat nails and do it." **WZA!**